

Coronavirus – sector response and current priorities

Briefing for housing associations and partners

December 2020

Summary

This briefing sets out housing associations' response to the coronavirus pandemic, and what more support is needed for residents and housing associations. Housing associations are working closely with local government and other partners to support people and communities. Housing association priorities are:

- **Keeping residents safe.**
- **Supporting residents through the economic impact** by:
 - Ensuring people claim all their entitlement to help.
 - Pledging that no one will be evicted from a housing association home as a result of financial hardship caused by coronavirus, where they are working with their housing association to get their payments back on track.
- **Keeping vital services running**, including care and support schemes to protect the most vulnerable and ease pressure on the NHS.

We welcome the vital steps the government has taken to support individuals and businesses. To further help residents, we're working with the government on a range of critical issues, including:

- **Ensuring the benefits system smoothly** supports everyone affected by the crisis to carry on paying their rent and manage living costs.
- **Addressing housing and support needs of homeless people** accommodated during the pandemic.
- **Ensuring vital care, support and other services can continue to operate**, with access to testing, vaccines, personal protective equipment and staff.

On top of these immediate priorities, housing associations are ready to work with the government to strengthen the economic and social recovery from the pandemic. We set out the long-term measures the government can take to help housing associations do that at the end of this briefing.

Introduction

The National Housing Federation (NHF) is the voice of housing associations in England. Our housing association members provide homes for around six million people, and have been working closely with residents, local government, the NHS and others to respond to the coronavirus crisis.

We welcome the vital steps the government has taken so far to support individuals and businesses. They have supported housing associations' priorities during the pandemic, which are:

1. Keeping residents safe
2. Supporting residents through the economic impact
3. Keeping vital services running

This briefing provides further details on these three priorities, outlining what housing associations are doing, and what we need from the government to support this.

On top of these immediate priorities, housing associations are ready to work with the government to strengthen the economic and social recovery from the pandemic. We set out the long-term measures the government can take to help housing associations do that at the end of this briefing.

1. Keeping people safe

Housing associations' first priority remains keeping residents, employees and communities safe.

What housing associations did during the first national lockdown

- **Put in place extensive contingency plans** to ensure critical functions could continue – for example, waking watches in high-rise buildings, vital remediation works and emergency repairs.
- **Ensured that critical safety functions could be fulfilled** without exposing employees or residents to the risk of contracting coronavirus – for example, calling ahead to every resident, sourcing and distributing protective equipment, and rescheduling appointments.
- **Took extra steps to protect residents who were self-isolating** if appointments had to be delayed – for example, by issuing carbon monoxide alarms.
- **Supported contractors and suppliers** where possible to continue critical functions, including paying small suppliers quicker where necessary to protect supply chains.

After the first lockdown, housing associations were able to restart non-emergency repairs, allocations and planned maintenance with appropriate measures to ensure the safety of residents and staff.

The NHF pressed the government to designate essential housing staff as key workers for the purpose of school closures and travel restrictions. This helped keep essential services going and it is vital that the government retains these designations where tighter lockdowns are imposed.

2. Protecting resident incomes and livelihoods

Housing associations are charitable organisations with a strong record of supporting tenants and residents through difficult times. Housing associations are redoubling these efforts in the current crisis.

We welcome the unprecedented measures the government is taking to support incomes and ensure that Universal Credit claims are paid on time. The new system to pay Universal Credit on the same day as it is paid to tenants is now being rolled out by DWP to all social landlords. This means that tenants now have an accurate picture of payments to their rent account and has freed up staff time to concentrate on supporting people to make and manage their claim.

What housing associations are doing

- **Committing not to evict anyone** for rent arrears accrued as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, where they are working to get payments back on track.
- **Putting in place extensive support to help residents manage falls in income** – for example, by quickly claiming all the benefits they're entitled to.
- **Setting money aside to support residents** via hardship and charitable funds.
- **Prioritising staff resources** so that claims continue to be verified on time.
- **Treating people with compassion and understanding** – for example, by deferring rent payments where needed, including during the five-week wait for Universal Credit.
- **Providing support for older or vulnerable residents** – for example, by phoning every resident to assess need in the event of self-isolation, and using staff and volunteers to help by funding or linking with other local charities and coordinating volunteers.

What we need from the government

People who experience a sudden fall in income will rely on the benefits system to meet their immediate living costs. The additional £20 per week for all households who receive Universal Credit has helped people better manage the loss of work and the additional costs associated with the pandemic. This money will still be vital next April and we urge the government to keep doing the right thing and retain this payment.

We still need to strengthen the benefits system so that people are able to stay safe and meet daily costs. **Therefore, for the duration of this crisis, we need a system that covers housing costs in full, which means that the DWP should:**

- Run large-scale publicity campaigns to make sure people claim what they are entitled to as soon as possible.
- Offer targeted help for families by suspending the household benefit cap.
- Make sure people have enough to live on week-to-week at the start of the claim by making sure people know about getting an advance.
- Ensure conditionality, sanctions and backdating rules for people claiming Universal Credit are appropriate given local rules.
- Provide significant additional funding for local authorities to offer Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments.
- **Make changes to the administration of Universal Credit – to help speed up the process, protect residents, and free up housing association staff time to concentrate on helping residents – by:**
 - Giving all new Universal Credit claimants the choice to make a direct payment from their benefit to their landlord. This will help people to budget month-to-month.
 - Improving the Landlord Portal to allow information flow between the DWP and social landlords. This will reduce DWP staff time, help social landlords support vulnerable residents and reduce fraud.
 - Allowing the bulk transfer of data from social landlords to DWP on annual rent changes

3. Sustaining critical services

Housing associations support older and vulnerable residents through a huge range of supported and sheltered housing schemes, hostels, refuges and outreach programmes. These services will be more vital than ever to help people through the coronavirus crisis and ease the burden on the NHS. In order to carry on keeping vulnerable people safe over the winter we need secure supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and access to testing and vaccines for staff and residents across the spectrum of supported housing. They also need support to retain staffing levels at an adequate level.

Housing associations also provide over 16,000 care home places. This pandemic has revealed the value of our care and support services and the urgent need to address underfunding, limited integration across health and social care and a lack of recognition of the skills and contribution of staff.

What housing associations are doing

- Planning carefully for how to keep **vital supported and sheltered housing services safe over the winter** – including homelessness hostels, domestic violence refuges, and specialist housing for older people and people with learning disabilities or mental health needs.
- Working with local authorities to provide self-contained emergency and move-on **accommodation to rough sleepers** where needed.
- Facilitating **timely hospital discharge** and reducing pressure on the NHS.

What we need from the government

- **Commit to helping meet the significant additional costs** facing some supported housing providers as they strive to keep services running.
- **Review the lessons from the first six months of the pandemic** and build on what worked locally and nationally.
- **Address the long-term, chronic underfunding of care and support services.**
- Ensure supported housing staff and residents have **access to coronavirus testing and vaccines**
- **Invest £1.6bn per year in housing-related support**, and ring-fence this money for local authorities, so the vital asset that is supported housing is put on a firm footing for the future.

Supporting social and economic recovery

Housing associations can boost the social and economic recovery that must follow the pandemic. They build much-needed affordable homes that deliver for the economy and create jobs. They are major social and economic anchor institutions in many communities, supporting community groups, small businesses, contractors and supply chains. They also provide vital employment and skills support and financial inclusion services that can help residents to weather the storm created by the pandemic.

Housing associations are ready to work with the government to strengthen the economic and social recovery. We set out the long-term measures the government can take to help them do that in our [Spending Review submission](#). In summary, we're calling for the government to:

Build a new generation of affordable homes

- **Provide immediate certainty and stability** to give housing association boards the confidence to sign off on ambitious plans, maintain delivery and create jobs.
- **Review the 2021-26 Affordable Homes Programme** to maximise the sector's counter-cyclical model and ensure homes remain viable for housing associations to develop.
- Deliver a fast-acting, broad-based economic and social stimulus and **invest an additional £20bn in grant funding for 2021-31**, to create a £32bn ten-year affordable housing fund.
- **Make funding available upfront to remediate all unsafe cladding**, to ensure residents' safety and enable leaseholders affected by External Wall Fire Review (EWS1) issues to move home.
- Support efforts to **develop the evidence base for offsite manufactured products** to overcome challenges that limit take-up.
- **Invest in supported housing** to meet the growing need and reduce spending on the NHS and social care
- **Invest in homes for social rent to ensure that rough sleepers and people at risk of homelessness are supported** into sustainable and affordable housing beyond the Next Steps Accommodation Programme.

Provide skills and job opportunities to get people into work

- **Bring together national departments and local housing partners** to design and mobilise a response to the Chancellor's Plan for Jobs.
- **Ensure that employment support meets needs across communities** and enables social housing to deliver in partnership for recovery.
- **Use the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to leverage and sustain long-term employment support** for vulnerable and disadvantaged households, in partnership with the social housing sector.

Kick-start a retrofit revolution

- Support housing associations and local authorities to **lead a retrofit revolution** to create jobs across the UK, to help build supply chains, and to support a longer-term nationwide rollout across all types of homes.
- Deliver on the manifesto commitment to **set up a £3.8bn Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund**, allowing housing associations to bid for funds directly and over multiple years.
- **Provide a policy road-map to 2050**, setting out the standards and requirements that housing associations will need to work towards to achieve the net zero ambition.
- **Commit to work more closely with housing associations**, residents, suppliers, lenders and investors to find solutions to the challenges that lie ahead on the road to net zero.

Level up opportunity across the country

- Demonstrate long-term commitment to regeneration and **invest at least £1bn of new funding each year over this decade**, in addition to current UK and EU funding levels.
- Develop a compelling **national strategy for regeneration** that targets the people and places in most need and empower local areas to deliver joined-up regeneration suited to their own circumstances.
- **Review the continued effectiveness of the Social Value Act**, and the extent of social value commissioning across public expenditure.

Improve outcomes in public services

- **Ring-fence housing-related support and allocate £1.6bn per year** to local authorities in England.
- **Invest in employment and skills programmes** to give people the financial resilience they need to avoid homelessness.